

Criminal Psychology in Tamil Literature: An Appraisal

Dr. S.Gothandaraman

Associate Professor of Tamil, Thiru. Vi. Ka. Government Arts College, Thiruvarur, Research Advisor & Doctoral Committee Convener, Bharathidasan University

ABSTRACT

This research paper articulates a rigorous interdisciplinary synthesis connecting classical Tamil grammatical theory principally Tolkappiyam and Sangam literary master pieces with contemporary constructs in criminal psychology and behavioral criminology. While western criminological discourse frequently traces its foundational roots to eighteenth-century European thinkers such as Cesare Beccaria and Jeremy Bentham, ancient Tamil textual traditions established a remarkably sophisticated taxonomy of human deviance, psychological motivation, criminal intent (*mens rea*), and penology nearly two millennia prior. By analyzing the Porulatikaram of Tolkappiyam, specifically the Meyppattiyal (theory of affective psychophysiology) and Tinai (socio-ecological determinism), alongside empirical case studies from Silappatikaram, Thirukkural, and Purananuru, this study demonstrates that ancient Tamil scholars conceptualized crime not merely as an arbitrary violation of sovereign decree, but as a complex psychological breakdown triggered by affective dysregulation, social strain, situational opportunity, and systemic institutional bias. The paper maps classical concepts such as Vehuli (rage), Atanam (contempt/greed), Palai Tinai (criminogenic environment), and Aram (internalized moral regulation) directly onto modern psychological theories including Agnew's General Strain Theory, Bandura's Moral Disengagement, Lombrosian offender taxonomies, and cognitive bias frameworks in judicial decision-making.

Keywords: Tamil Grammar, Tolkappiyam, Criminal Psychology, Criminology, Meyppattiyal, Silappatikaram, Mens Rea, Eco-Criminology, Judicial Bias.

1. INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The evolution of criminal psychology as a formal academic discipline in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries revolutionized the judicial understanding of illegal behavior by shifting the focus from the act itself (*actus reus*) to the internal mental state, affective drivers, and cognitive processes of the actor (*mens rea*). Contemporary criminological literature typically categorizes offender behavior through multi-level paradigms encompassing neurobiology, cognitive distortion, environmental strain, and psychodynamic conflict. However, a critical examination of ancient non-Western intellectual traditions reveals that highly refined frameworks of human behavioral deviance existed long before the formalization of modern Western psychology.

Among these ancient traditions, classical Tamil literature and grammatical treatises stand out for their deep, empirical observation of human nature. Far from treating grammar as a mere set of syntactic and

linguistic rules, ancient Tamil grammarians recognized language and literature as living reflections of social, affective, and psychological reality. The foundational grammatical text, Tolkappiyam, authored by Tolkappiyar, divides human experience into Aham (internal affective life, love, and emotional bonds) and Puram (external social conduct, warfare, governance, ethics, and conflict). Within this framework, human action—including antisocial, deviant, and criminal acts—is understood as the external manifestation of internal affective states governed by environmental and psychological dynamics.

The primary objective of this paper is to construct a rigorous comparative bridge between classical Tamil literature/ grammar and contemporary criminal psychology. By analyzing grammatical classifications such as Meyppattu (psychophysiological affective states) and Tinai (ecological-environmental contexts) alongside narrative case studies from the post-Sangam epic Silappatikaram and ethical texts like Thirukkural, this study highlights how classical Tamil thinkers anticipated core tenets of modern behavioral criminology, offender profiling, situational crime prevention, and judicial psycholog

2. EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND GRAMMATICAL FOUNDATIONS: TOLKAPPIYAM AN INTENT

In modern criminal jurisprudence, the establishment of criminal liability requires proving both actus reus (the physical guilty act) and mens rea (the mental state of intent, knowledge, recklessness, or negligence). In Tolkappiyam, the Porulatikaram serves as an exhaustive treatise on the psychological and social grammar of human behavior. Tolkappiyar establishes that physical actions do not occur in a vacuum; they are directly precipitated by specific psychophysiological responses termed Meyppattu.

Meyppattiyal: Affective Psychophysiology and Offender Motivation

In the Meyppattiyal section of Porulatikaram, Tolkappiyar codifies eight primary physical-emotional manifestations (Meyppatukal): Nakai (mirth/mockery), Azhukai (grief/sorrow), Ilivalar (disgust/contempt), Marutkai (wonder/ astonishment), Acham (fear/anxiety), Perumitham (pride/arrogance), Vehuli (rage/anger), and Uvakai (joy/pleasure). In criminal psychology, these primary emotional states correspond directly to the affective catalysts responsible for violent offenses, property crimes, and interpersonal victimizations.

**"நகையே அழகை இளிவரல் மருட்கை
அச்சம் பெருமிதம் வெகுளி உவகையென்று
அப்பால் எட்டே மெய்ப்பாடு என்ப."**

Tolkappiyam, Porulatikaram, Meyppattiyal, Sutra 247

To understand criminal motivation through the lens of Tolkappiyam, one must examine how extreme expressions of specific Meyppatukal bypass cognitive self-control mechanism (what Thirukkural later terms Adakkam):

- **Vehuli (Rage/Anger):** Corresponds to impulse-driven violent crimes, expressive homicide, and battery. Modern aggression theories (such as Berkowitz's Frustration-Aggression Model) explain how acute rage overwhelms prefrontal cognitive regulation, leading to immediate destructive behavior.
- **Ilivalar (Disgust/Contempt) and Perumitham (Arrogance/Narcissism):** When combined with an absence of empathy, these emotional states precipitate predatory violence, hate crimes, and

white-collar exploitation. Arrogance fosters a sense of entitlement, allowing offenders to disinhibit normal social restraints.

- **Acham (Fear/Paranoia):** Operates as a psychological catalyst for reactive violence, defensive aggression, and preemptive strikes against perceived threats.

Tinai Theory: Environmental Criminology and Criminogenic Settings

One of the most revolutionary aspects of Tolkappiyam is its Tinai classification, which connects human psychological states (Urikpporul) with geographical landscapes (Muthalpporul) and seasonal/temporal vectors (Karupporul). Modern environmental criminology specifically Crime Pattern Theory (Brantingham) and Routine Activity Theory (Cohen and Felson) posits that criminal acts occur at the intersection of motivated offenders, suitable targets, and criminogenic environments

Tolkappiyar designates five major landscapes (Ainthinai), among which Palai Tinai (arid/desert land) is explicitly associated with distress, hardship, separation, and violent predation. In classical Tamil literature, Palai serves as the spatial domain for highway robbery (Aalai), waylaying travelers, and resource-driven theft by marginalized groups (Eyinar / Maravar). Grammatically and psychologically, the harshness of the Palai terrain generates severe survival stress, which reduces the perceived risk of illegal conduct while elevating the immediate material utility of crime. This ecological mapping prefigures Robert Agnew's General Strain Theory, which argues that chronic environmental strains such as economic deprivation and physical hardship generate negative emotional states that demand immediate corrective action, often through illegal channels.

Table 1: Comparative Mapping of Tolkappiyam Grammatical Frameworks to Modern Criminological Constructs

CLASSICAL TAMIL GRAMMATICAL LITERARY CONSTRUCT	AFFECTIVE / ECOLOGICAL DIMENSION	MODERN CRIMINOLOGICAL & PSYCHOLOGICAL EQUIVALENT	BEHAVIORAL OUTCOME
Vehuli (வெகுளி)	Acute, uncontrolled rage and anger	Impulsive Aggression / Intermittent Explosive Disorder	Expressive violence, assault, crimes of passion
Perumitham (பெருமிதம்)	Narcissistic pride, entitlement	Psychopathy / Narcissism	Exploitation, domestic tyranny, white-collar crime
Izhivaral (இளிவெரல்)	Contempt, dehumanization of others	Bandura's Disengagement	Moral crimes, systematic abuse, lack of remorse
Palai Tinai (பொலைத் திணை)	Arid, desolate, resource-scarce environment	Environmental Criminology / Strain Theory	Predatory highway robbery, resource theft

Kaikkilai (கைக்கிளி)	Unrequited, non-consensual obsession	Erotomaniac Stalking / Sexual Harassment	Boundary violations, coercive control
Perunthinai (பெருந்திணை)	Mismatched, improper, or coerced passion	Paraphilic Disorders / Relational Deviance	Societal norm violations, sexual aggression

TAXONOMIC MAPPING OF CRIMINAL MOTIVES IN CLASSICAL TEXTS

Beyond formal grammar, classical Tamil literature offers rich narrative and didactic explorations of why individuals commit deviant acts. These texts categorize motives into distinct psychological profiles ranging from acquisitive greed to political tyranny and cognitive bias.

Acquisitive Crime and Psychopathic Deceit: The Silappatikaram Jeweler

In Ilango Adigal's epic Silappatikaram, the state jeweler (Porkollan) of Madurai represents a textbook case of an acquisitive, psychopathic offender. Having stolen the Queen's pearl-encrusted anklet, the jeweler encounters Kovalan, who arrives in the city seeking to sell his wife Kannagi's ruby-encrusted anklet. The jeweler immediately recognizes Kovalan as a convenient scapegoat, formulates a deceptive manipulation strategy, and frames him for the royal theft.

From a criminal psychology perspective, the jeweler exhibits key clinical traits of Anti-Social Personality Disorder (ASPD) and Machiavellianism:

- **Pathological Lying and Deceit:** The jeweler seamlessly fabricates a convincing narrative to mislead King Neduncheziyan, capitalizing on royal paranoia.
- **Lack of Empathy and Remorse:** He knowingly sends an innocent traveler (Kovalan) to extrajudicial execution without hesitation, driven entirely by self-preservation and material greed.
- **Calculated Opportunism:** The jeweler identifies Kovalan's vulnerability (a stranger in a foreign city, unfamiliar with local administrative protocols) and exploits it with calculated precision.

State Tyranny and Power-Induced Psychological Degradation: Thirukkural

In the Porutpal (Section on Polity and Social Life) of Thirukkural, the philosopher-poet Thiruvalluvar dedicates specific chapters to bad governance and tyranny—namely Kodungonmai (Cruel Tyranny) and Veravandhal (Governance by Terror). Thiruvalluvar provides a striking analysis of how unbridled institutional power alters cognitive processing and degrades moral judgment.

"வேலொடு நின்றான் இடுவென்றது போலும்

கோலொடு நின்றான் இரவு." (திருக்குறள், குறள் 552)

In Kural 552, Valluvar compares a tyrant demanding wealth from his citizens to an armed highway robber demanding belongings from a defenseless traveler at spearpoint. This explicit analogy highlights that extortion by state actors and street-level armed robbery share identical psychological mechanisms: coercive control backed by the threat of violence. Valluvar further explains that tyrants who rule through fear (Veravandhal) inevitably develop severe psychological paranoia (Irai Kadiyan), isolating themselves from honest counsel, distorting their perception of reality, and ultimately precipitating their own institutional collapse.

Interpersonal Betrayal and Sociopolitical Alienation in Purananuru

The Purananuru anthology contains multiple poems exploring themes of Throgam (treason) and political betrayal. In the context of ancient Tamil heroic society, loyalty to the chieftain or king formed the fundamental social contract. Treason was viewed not merely as a political offense, but as a severe psychological pathology rooted in envy, perceived marginalization, or ideological alienation. The texts show that political betrayals frequently stemmed from a loss of social status or perceived slights, illustrating how personal slights transform into anti-social behaviors targeting the broader community.

3. JUDICIAL PSYCHOLOGY, COGNITIVE BIAS, AND STRUCTURAL FAILURES

A critical dimension of modern criminal psychology concerns judicial decision-making—specifically how cognitive biases, emotional stress, and systemic flaws lead to miscarriages of justice. The tragic narrative arc of Silappatikaram offers one of world literature's most profound case studies in judicial error and its devastating psychological consequences.

4. CASE ANALYSIS: THE EXECUTION OF KOVALAN IN SILAPPATIKARAM

Background: Kovalan enters Madurai to sell Kannagi's anklet. He meets the King's chief jeweler, who has stolen the Queen's anklet and seeks to cover his crime.

Judicial Breakdown Mechanisms:

- 1. Confirmation Bias & Preconceived Notions:** King Neduncheziyan, distracted by courtly festivities and eager to appease the Queen, immediately accepts the jeweler's claim that Kovalan is the thief without examining physical evidence.
- 2. Failure of Evidentiary Verification (Procedural Default):** The King issues an immediate execution order without inspecting the contents of the anklet (pearls vs. rubies) or conducting a formal interrogation of the suspect.
- 3. Heuristic Decision-Making under Stress:** Eager to resolve the high-profile theft quickly, the King relies on simple heuristics rather than exhaustive investigation, falling prey to the jeweler's deliberate misdirection.

When Kannagi presents herself at the royal court and shatters her remaining anklet revealing brilliant red rubies, unlike the Queen's anklet which contained white pearls the King instantly recognizes the magnitude of his error. The psychological impact of this realization is immediate and fatal:

"பொன்செய் கொல்லன் தன்சொல் கேட்ட

யானோ அரசன்? யானே கள்வன்!" (சிலப்பதிகாரம், வழக்குரை காதை, வரிகள் 74-75)

The King exclaims, "Is it I who am king after believing the words of a gold-smith? Nay, I am the thief!" From a psychological perspective, the King experiences acute, unresolvable cognitive dissonance a profound conflict between his idealized self-concept as the supreme guardian of justice (Sengol) and the reality that he executed an innocent man. The collapse of his psychological self-identity triggers

immediate psychosomatic failure, causing his instant physical death on the throne. This episode serves as an enduring warning regarding the psychological dangers of hasty judicial reasoning and cognitive bias

5. PENOLOGY, DETERRENCE AND REHABILITATION IN ANCIENT TAMIL THOUGHT

Ancient Tamil literature presents a balanced philosophy of penology that combines strict legal deterrence with deep internal rehabilitation driven by moral consciousness.

Deterrence Theory and Thirukkural

Centuries before Cesare Beccaria formulated classical deterrence theory positing that punishment must be swift, certain, and severe enough to outweigh the gains of crime Thiruvalluvar articulated similar principles regarding state punishment (Dandani):

"தக்காங்கு நாடித் தலைச்செல்லா வண்ணத்தால்

ஓத்தாங்கு ஒறுப்பது அரசு."— (திருக்குறள், குறள் 561)

In Kural 561, Valluvar states that a true ruler investigates the crime thoroughly, ensures punishment is proportionate (Thakkaangu Naadi), and administers it in a manner that prevents future recidivism (Thalaichella Vannathal). Valluvar also addresses the psychology of deterrence in Kural 562, advising that while a ruler should project a formidable presence during investigation, the actual punishment administered should be measured and precise preventing public resentment while maintaining social order.

Internalized Regulation (Aram) vs. External Coercion

Modern criminological research consistently demonstrates that formal legal sanctions alone cannot maintain social order; long-term compliance relies on internal moral regulation and perceived legal legitimacy. Classical Tamil philosophy anchors this internal mechanism in the concept of Aram (righteousness/moral duty).

Thirukkural identifies internal cognitive purity as the foundational foundation of non-deviant behavior: "Manathukkan Maasilan Aathal Anaithu Aran" (Purity of mind is the essence of all virtue; Kural 34). In criminal psychology, an individual's inability to maintain internal self-regulation leads to cognitive neutralization techniques rationalizations that justify illegal acts. Thirukkural systematically critiques these rationalizations by targeting four primary psychological vices: Ahuva (envy), Ahavahuvai (greed), Vehuli (uncontrolled rage), and Innachol (harsh/abusive speech). By urging individuals to eliminate these internal vices, ancient Tamil ethics sought to prevent deviance at its psychological source, long before it could manifest as a criminal act.

6. CONCLUSION AND MODERN RELEVANCE

This comparative analysis demonstrates that classical Tamil literary and grammatical traditions contain a sophisticated, highly structured understanding of criminal psychology and criminological theory. Far from viewing human deviance in purely theological or arbitrary terms, ancient Tamil thinkers represented by Tolkappiyar, Thiruvalluvar, and Ilango Adigal conceptualized crime as an expression of psychological dysregulation, ecological pressure, situational opportunity, and institutional failure.

The Meyppattiyal of Tolkappiyam provides an affective taxonomy of human emotion that explains the psychological roots of violent and acquisitive crimes. The Tinai system offers an early form of environmental criminology, showing how physical surroundings shape human behavior. Case studies like the execution of Kovalan in Silappatikaram highlight the devastating impact of cognitive bias in

judicial systems, while Thirukkural offers enduring insights into deterrence, proportionality, and the primacy of internal moral regulation.

Integrating these ancient Tamil intellectual frameworks into contemporary criminological discourse enriches our global understanding of human behavior. By bridging classical humanistic texts with modern empirical psychology, scholars can build more comprehensive, culturally inclusive models for understanding crime, improving judicial reasoning, and promoting genuine rehabilitation.

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